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ANALYSIS OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ZINES

By

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B.A., Bellarmine University, 2016

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
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for the Degree of

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University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

August 2020

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A Thesis Approved on

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ABSTRACT

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Anna Blake

August 11, 2020

This thesis is an analysis of twenty-first century zines as markedly different from their predecessors. The twenty-first century zine is often framed as a continuation of the punk zines from the late twentieth century, this thesis disagrees and argues for the classification of the twenty-first century zine as a unique form of culture that has evolved from the punk zines of the 1980s and 90s.

The thesis is divided into five chapters in which the twenty-first century zine is analyzed using specific examples. Chapter one begins with an introduction of the zine, defining the object based on its social consequences in relation to the production of media and culture. The zine is defined by its alliance with participatory culture, its participation in Walter Benjamin's progressive culture, and in defiance of bell hooks' and Riane Eisler's dominator culture. Chapter two analyzes the zine's position within the intersection of art and media, establishing the zine as a valid art object with Dadaist precedents, participating in critical discourses with art institutions, and as a tool for minority groups to "disidentify" with a phobic majoritarian culture.

Chapter three addresses the importance of materiality in the twenty-first century zine as something that is uniquely important to the object. For the first time ever, the physical zine is an inconvenience to makers and collectors, yet it persists as an anachronism in a digital age. The

importance of this materiality is examined as it pertains to an essential understanding of the object's content, an extension of the human, and the technological reproducibility of the zine. Chapter four examines the zine as a tool for radical social justice, analyzing its role centralizing decentralized communities, in correcting misrepresentations, and creating safety in print for minority communities to express their thoughts and opinions without fear. Finally, chapter five concludes the thesis by establishing the enduring legitimacy of the zine and why it matters, arguing that the zine is an enduring example of bell hooks' "pedagogy of hope" that combats deeply ingrained cynicism.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, the zine seems like a novel relic of twentieth-century underground culture. Communicating by mail is no longer convenient and communities are held together by digital media rather than by print. The utilitarian purposes that initially influenced the formation of the zine are no longer relevant as the globalized internet has met almost all communication needs. However, zines are still being made and continue to evolve despite the absence of the superficial conditions that once determined their production. I first encountered zines in 2015 and have since observed differences in the zines I have found and the zines that have been documented by scholars, most of whom have only studied zines that were made in the late twentieth-century, with very few analyzing zines made after 2010. Given the radical changes in technology, politics, and society that is being experienced by a new generation of artists, it would make sense that the zine has evolved to meet the needs of its makers and readers and should be considered an art object that reflects the environment it was made in. I intend to examine the contemporary zine as an art object that is markedly different from its predecessors by first analyzing its arrangement within the intersection of fine art and media, then studying its significance as an anachronistic object in the context of our contemporary digital lifestyle. Finally, I will examine the role of the zine in contemporary society as a tool for radical social justice.

A singular definition of the zine can be constricting, but in general a zine is a cheaply produced, independently distributed, book-like object. The size of the zine, though most commonly that of a four by five-inch booklet, can be smaller or significantly larger, such as those printed on newsprint and folded as such. Content can consist of but is not limited to do-it-yourself guides, personal diary entries, illustrations and comics, taxonomies, essays, and musings. Often described as alternative or underground media, they can be hard to find for the uninitiated while those who collect them have an enthusiasm akin to vinyl record collectors. They have long been a tool for distributing dissenting beliefs and ideas and for this reason are popular among anarchists and fringe groups. They are often made by artists but tend to find a niche in independent publishing rather than the art market.

In *Notes from Underground*, the first and most comprehensive study of late twentieth-century zines, Stephen Duncombe established the late 1990's forward as the "post-discovery age" based on mainstream attention in major publications.¹ Today, independent bookstores, now with multiple locations and online ordering, have made it easier to uncover the alternative press. Online forums like Reddit have multiple communities dedicated to zines where makers often will give away their work to anyone who sends them their address. Similarly, microblogging platforms like Twitter and Instagram have established communities independent of geographic boundaries and given artists massive and accessible platforms. This relatively new accessibility of the zine contrasts the purist attitudes of the pre-discovery community Duncombe describes: one in

1. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 177.

which those who were “in” actively worked to differentiate themselves from those who were “out,” in which “setting yourself apart from ‘them’ is integral to underground identity.”²

Duncombe notes an event with zine-turned-magazine *Girljock* that marked a turning point in changing attitudes of mainstream discovery. A lesbian sports zine, *Girljock* was branded as “selling out” in the 1990s when it “transformed... into a glossy magazine complete with an Absolut vodka advertisement on the back of one issue.”³ However, the movement of *Girljock* into the mainstream revealed a very real need: an inclusive and accessible community that is not restricted by underground mechanisms that can keep those who are the most isolated out. On the decision, *Girljock* creator Roxxie is quoted as saying: “I suppose it’s my wish that teenage girls will have more options for themselves as they’re growing up. And so if you’re, say, a very isolated teenager somewhere in the Midwest, hopefully there might be a place where you might be able... to run into something like *Girljock*.”⁴ For *Girljock* and similar zines, the “purity” of the underground culture came at the cost of exclusion for certain groups. Post-discovery, zine makers have used the mainstream attention to their advantage: to move closer to a visible, accessible, and inclusive community. We see this in zines like *Survivance*, available on accessible platforms like Etsy, that aims to “heal, inform,

2. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 46.

3. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 177.

4. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 177-178.

empower, and mobilize Indigenous communities... and acts as a bridge between Indigenous tribes from the colonized lands of Canada and the United States of America.”⁵

In addition to changes in attitudes concerning accessibility, the demographics of those making and consuming zines have changed from their initial white, middle-class origins. In 1997, Duncombe noted that “most zinesters are young and the children of professionals, culturally if not financially middle-class. White and raised in a relatively privileged position within the dominant culture, they have since embarked on ‘careers’ of deviance that have moved them to the edges of this society.”⁶ While there weren’t any studies proving these demographics then, nor are there any studies now, I would argue that this statement is only partially true today. Any community of artists has a certain number of extremely privileged individuals. A 2019 study found that for every \$10,000 in additional family income, an individual is two percent more likely to have a creative occupation in the United States.⁷ However, advances in technology have made the barrier of entry lower than ever before for those wishing to make zines and there is no formal training required. My experience researching trends in the content of zines and the community surrounding them revealed notably less privileged groups using zines to communicate, revealing a shift from privileged creators towards minority groups using the zine as an accessible platform. I will discuss this more in chapter four, but want to state now that this demographic shift, if it is an accurate observation, should be

5. *Survivance vol. IV*, (R.I.S.E.: Radical Indigenous Survivance & Empowerment, 2019), vii.

6. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 10.

7. Karol Jan Borowiecki, "The Origins of Creativity: The Case of the Arts in the United States since 1850," Trinity Economics Papers, last modified February 2019, <https://ideas.repec.org/p/tcd/tcduee/tep0219.html>.

acknowledged when considering the movement towards zines as tools for radical social justice.

The priority of past zines of being alternative for the sake of it has been replaced by a priority of promoting alternative dialogue to as many people that need it as possible. This isn't to say that all zines in the past did not have anything meaningful to say - after all, there is a rich history of distributing radical dissenting dialogue via Latin American mail art or Eastern European samizdat. Rather, it is to acknowledge the privilege of many past zine makers versus the reality of many zine makers today who are actively pushing against a society in which their very existence is considered dissent. I will rely on Duncombe's discussion zines from *Notes from Underground*, as his analysis is heavily slanted in the context of late twentieth-century zines that are no longer in circulation nor available for me to study myself. Zines no longer in circulation like Terry Ward's *Notes from the Dump* in which Ward proudly chooses to live on the margins after "dropping out" of society⁸ reveal a certain pride in making the choice to leave larger society behind. Similarly, Pete Jordan's *Dishwasher* that detailed his life as a travelling part-time dishwasher with goals to wash dishes in all fifty states⁹ tells us that these makers made a conscious choice to eschew mainstream societal expectations – even when Jordan was invited to appear on Late Night with David Letterman.¹⁰ These, and many other zines Duncombe discusses, still contain radical and progressive ideas relating to anti-hegemonic lifestyles. However, these zines display a certain amount of privilege in which

8. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 28.

9. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 80.

10. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 157.

the writer can choose whether to live on the margins. In my own research on zines made after 2015 and notably after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, I have yet to come across a zine that exalts the decision to be marginalized, but rather come across zines made by those who have no choice.

Given the observed differences between zines that have been the subject of so much academic scrutiny and zines made today, establishing what hasn't changed is necessary. Looking back at the zine's evolution from early independent media, to the original science fiction fanzines of the 1930s, mail art movements, Eastern European samizdat, punk zines, and grrrl zines, certain underlying attitudes become clear regardless of origin: all zines engage in participatory media, are forms of progressive culture, and critique dominator culture.

Participatory Media

Participatory media are a type of media in which private individuals contribute directly to the production of culture, bypassing mass production and distribution systems.¹¹ Historically, zines and their predecessors have come from private individuals who felt that the media that was sold to them was lacking. Science fiction zines, canonically considered the first zines, were made for this very reason. Frustrated by

11. Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis, "We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information," The American Press Institute, The Media Center, last modified 2003, http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/download/we_media.pdf.

having to communicate with other fans through letters submitted and published by official magazines, “fanzines” like *The Comet* were created by private individuals to establish a more equitable means of communication that didn’t rely on conventional production modes.¹² Feminist zine scholar Alison Piepmeier points to an earlier predecessor in the form of first-wave feminism’s sexual health pamphlets. In 1914, when the Comstock Law censored Margaret Sanger’s columns in *New York Call*, Sanger started her own underground newspaper, the *Woman Rebel*, to offer advice and information on sexual health and contraception. In addition, Sanger made a small pamphlet titled *Family Limitation*, which was distributed by allies as Sanger hid to avoid persecution. Other pamphlets, like Mary Ware Dennett’s 1915 *The Sex Side of Life: An Explanation for Young People* soon followed, establishing an early history of radical independent publishing practices.¹³ Even earlier in 1827, Samuel Cornish and John B. Russworm, two free African American men, established *Freedom’s Journal* when their letters to the editor were not published by the *New York Enquirer*.¹⁴ Like science fiction fanzines, these publications came from private individuals who saw a gap in the media that were sold to them, so they made their own.

Following the tradition set forth by first-wave feminists like Sanger and Dennett, multiple zines are made today addressing sexual and reproductive health in the wake of nation-wide public school mandates limiting sex education in classrooms. Alyssa Beers’ *Menstruation Sensation* tackles biases in public education curriculum to give those who

12. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 116.

13. Alison Piepmeier, *Grrrl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 34.

14. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 132.

menstruate a better understanding of their bodies and allow them to make informed decisions on health and hygiene. Elie Katzenson's *I'm Not Ready* goes further in tackling the stigmatizing of sexual and reproductive health education by presenting stories written and submitted by those who have had abortions. Coincidentally, both these zines are published by Microcosm Publishing, an independent publishing house in Portland, Oregon. Microcosm registers ISBNs for their zines, and even place barcodes on the backs of the zines. In all my research, I have never seen another independent zine publisher make this small yet significant move towards institutional validation as one of the largest obstacles to libraries collecting zines is their lack of ISBNs.¹⁵ My gut reaction when receiving these zines was to declare them illegitimate. However, like the case with *Girljock*, this decision was made not to adhere to the consumer media system that zines ought to reject, but to infiltrate accessible systems with radically participatory media. Afterall, had Microcosm not made these efforts, I would not have been able to access them from nearly three thousand miles away. This detail demonstrates the contemporary zine's efforts to prioritize accessibility discussed earlier.

15. Susan E. Thomas, "Value and Validity of Art Zines as an Art Form," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 28, no. 2 (2009): 27 – 36, 38, doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27949520>

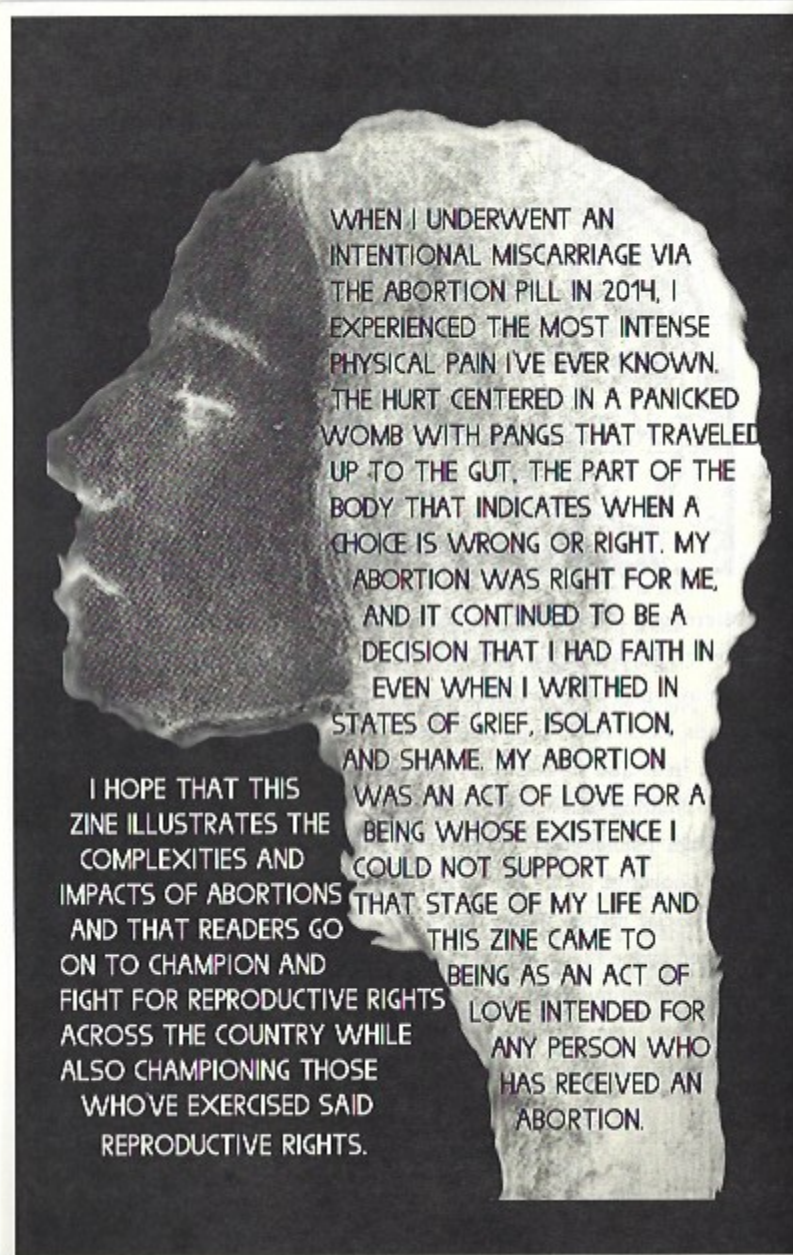


Figure 1: Elie Katzenson, page from *I'm Not Ready*, 2019, 8.5 x 5.5 inches

Voices: Indigenous Women on the Front Lines Speak is a zine by beyon wren moor and Wulfgang Zapf that was also made to fill the gaps left by consumer media. In their introduction to volume eight, they write:

The common narrative of front line resistance today-repeated in both mainstream and grassroots media-focuses almost exclusively on tough white and Indigenous cis men having dangerous adventures out on the land. The reality is that incredible Indigenous women, matriarchs, mothers, Elders, and 2Spirit people are the water protectors, land defenders, warriors, and the caretakers... This series presents their stories as told by them, and does not sensationalize front line resistance with simplified settler fantasies of 'authentic' Indigenous resistance.¹⁶

moor and Zapf are not affiliated with any sort of production entity - they are private individuals who are contributing to the media landscape through their zine. With nine issues total, *Voices* features in-depth interviews and accompanying photographs and illustrations that offer a rich insight into people who are overlooked by consumer media. While materiality will be discussed in chapter three, it is important to note the zine's physical presence in this instance. The materiality of the zine acts as a form of symbolic resistance as its physical presence combats colonial efforts to remove Indigenous presence through genocide, forced assimilation, and the renaming of land by taking up space and thus providing testimony to Indigenous resistance.

16. beyon wren moor and Wulfgang Zapf, *Voices: Indigenous Women on the Front Lines Speak Volume 8*.

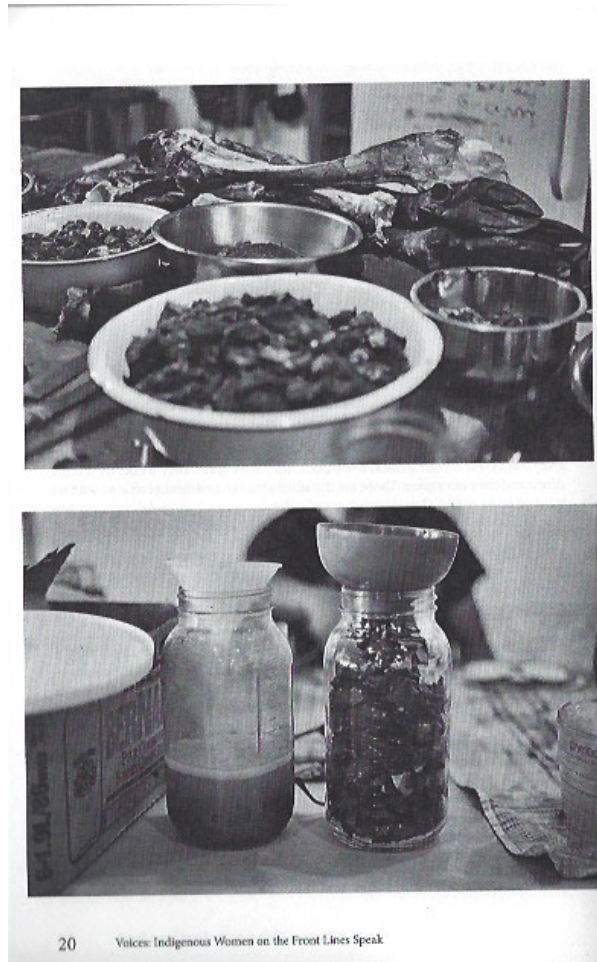


Figure 2: beyon wren moor and Wulfgang Zapf, page from *Voices: Indigenous Women on the Front Lines Speak* Volume 8, 8.5 x 5.5 inches

Voices works in another radical way that the zine format is uniquely situated to facilitate: Indigenous names for locations are capitalized and colonial names are not. This is a small visual cue that invalidates the legitimacy of colonial authority in a powerful way as the reader is constantly exposed to the tension within the social and political relationships that sustain colonial hierarchies. The

interviews conducted in *Voices* are certainly worthy of more established journalistic platforms and publishing on an established platform would certainly expose the project to more people, but the selective capitalization that Wren and Zapf employ would be compromised by official style guides and outside editors. While the goal of *Voices* is to fill the gaps left by consumer media, it is *also* to do so in a way that circumvents dominant communication platforms. For Wren and Zapf, there is nothing progressive about media that are produced by anyone other than those closest to the story.

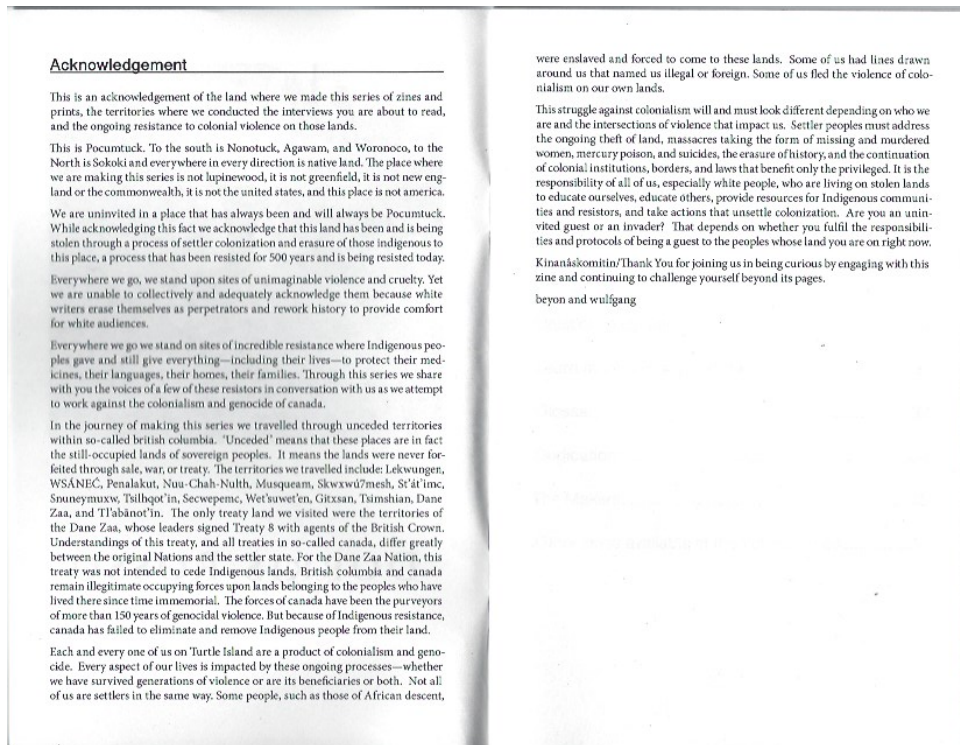


Figure 3: beyon wren moor and Wulfgang Zapf, pages from *Voices: Indigenous Women on the Front Lines Speak Volume 8*, 8.5 x 5.5 inches.

Progressive Culture

The zine's role in participatory media establishes it as what Walter Benjamin would classify as truly progressive, even revolutionary culture. In "The Author as Producer," Benjamin offers a critique of intellectuals who may share similar attitudes of

the proletariat. These intellectuals have access to production and even if they sympathize the proletariat, they still hold a hierarchical power over the proletariat and thus produce in ways that ensures the stability of that hierarchy. He writes: "A political tendency, however revolutionary it may seem, has a counterrevolutionary function as the writer feels his solidarity with the proletariat only in his attitudes, not as a producer."¹⁷ Today, we can compare these intellectuals to privileged producers of culture and the proletariat to private individuals who lack resources and authority to be legitimized by the capitalist processes of production. In the context of participatory media, the proletariat is the only class that can contribute to participatory culture. Commercial media process, which are largely accessible only for the most privileged producers cannot truly impact the progressive politics needed for less privileged groups. Benjamin takes a harsh stance: No matter how progressive the content of the media, the work cannot be truly revolutionary if its producers are working in the interest of consumer production that inherently works to uphold the intellectual/proletariat hierarchy.

Benjamin uses a series of photographs by Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Die Welt ist schön* (*A Beautiful World*), as an example of the disconnect between progressive attitudes and consumer production. Published as a highly successful book, Renger-Patzsch's series featured an assortment of photographs of the natural and built environment in a manner that followed the New Objectivity movement (Benjamin calls this "New Matter-of-factness"). The series, according to Benjamin, transforms "abject poverty, by recording it

17. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Art After Modernism*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 297-309.

in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object of enjoyment... Here we have a flagrant example of what it means to supply a production apparatus without changing it.”¹⁸

Regardless of the progressive attitude of a form of culture, it cannot be truly progressive while remaining complicit to the hierarchical process of production that only lets certain individuals produce. The solution, according to Benjamin, is only by “transcending the specialization in the process of production that, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order...”¹⁹ That is, only by removing the barriers that legitimize culture can a truly democratic and progressive culture follow. What type of progress can be made when culture is produced to be consumed by and for only a small fraction of people?

“The Author as Producer” was written in 1934, just as some of the first science fiction fanzines were being produced. Benjamin could not have predicted the evolution of the zine from then to where we are now. From the beginning, however, the zine transcended the specialization in the process of production that Benjamin identifies as a solution. Because it is independently published, the maker does not need to rely on outside approval. With today’s digital design and photocopying technology, specialized knowledge is no longer required in the way that it once was for printing. Even then, the zine never required the maker to be a master at the craft. As evidenced by the punk movement, amateur-appearing zines were desired as they represented a rejection of

18. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Art After Modernism*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 297-309.

19. Ibid.

consumption and fetishization by the art market.²⁰ The zine can therefore be applied to Benjamin's theory of progressive culture in that it functions as a tool that legitimizes and validates the thoughts, ideas, and culture of those who are otherwise not authorized to communicate them: the proletariat.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how contemporary zines are closer to the mainstream than ever before, a moment I referred to as "post-discovery," and expressed the value of accessibility via mainstream sources. There is, of course, a danger in mainstream attention. Benjamin notes: "The bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes, indeed, can propagate them without calling its own existence, and the existence of the class that owns it, seriously into question."²¹ In a grotesquely extreme example of this, rapper and entrepreneur Kanye West has been known to issue zines in tandem with new releases of his fashion collection. Retailing on Amazon for \$22.99²² however, this "zine" hardly resembles the non-commercial, independently made publications with its glossy, professionally produced full-color images. It is in this instance we see intellectuals – that is, a privileged class – appropriating the anti-consumer attitudes that exist in legitimate zine communities to uphold a pro-consumer hierarchy.

This example introduces a caveat to the value of mainstream adjacency. If the zine becomes a product sold in a chain bookstore (like we saw with *Girljock*) or a single

20. Teal Triggs, "Typo-Anarchy: A New Look at the Fanzine Revolution," in *The Magazine: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Gwen Allen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, Whitechapel Gallery, 2016), 133-137.

21. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Art After Modernism*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 297-309.

22. As of July 17, 2020.

art object auctioned off for more than most can manage, it loses whatever claim it has to be a zine. While there is value in mainstream discovery, Benjamin's point and the example provided by West's marketing team tells us that the zine can easily be co-opted by a production apparatus without challenging it. In fact, copies of Raymond Pettibon's extremely successful zine *Tripping Corpse* has already been used in this co-opting by the art market. The L.A. County Museum of Art has a listing for *Tripping Corpse 6* listed for \$200²³ on their online store. Despite absolutely zero changes to the content of *Tripping Corpse 6*, the commercial fetishization invalidates the object's claim at being a zine as it is now an exclusive collector's item. The contemporary zine balances on a thin line between a dichotomy of being an item that can be collected versus a collector's item. I make this distinction because most zines are collected, but their prices never go beyond what their intended audience can afford. With hundreds of thousands of titles printed in various amounts, there is more than enough to go around for readers to build a collection based on their interests. A collector's item, on the other hand, has an inflated price due to the status of the artist and becomes inaccessible to the regular consumers of zines. The monetary valuation of *Tripping Corpse 6* gives it an aura of preciousness that establishes it as an outlier to Walter Benjamin's theory that the technological reproducibility of an object contributes to the deterioration of such an aura – discussed more in chapter three.

23. As of July 17, 2020, <https://www.thelacmystore.org/products/raymond-pettibon-tripping-corpse-6-zine-rare>

Dominator Culture

bell hooks defines dominator culture as hegemonic, patriarchal, imperialist white-supremacist thought that is reinforced by institutionalized systems of domination based on race, sex, and nationalist imperialism.²⁴ This is studied in depth by Riane Eisler, who contrasts dominator systems with partnership systems. Whereas the dominator model is “based on rigid rankings of domination ultimately backed up by fear and force,”²⁵ the partnership model is “based in mutual respect, mutual accountability, and mutual benefit.” Dominator societies, according to Eisler, tend to display rigid structures of top-down rankings, rigid rankings of one half over the other, and belief that these relations are inevitable.²⁶

hooks suggests radical teaching pedagogies to encourage students to unlearn the profoundly cynical mindset that dominator culture teaches through mass media, writing: “Through the cultivation of awareness, through the decolonization of our minds, we have the tools to break with the dominator model of human social engagement and the will to imagine new and different ways that people might come together.”²⁷ This pedagogy that encourages students to identify dominator culture, think for themselves, and go beyond what is being communicated in mass media can be found in zines as well and is directly linked

24. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

25. Riane Eisler, “Human Possibilities: The Interaction of Biology and Culture,” in *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1-38, doi: <https://doi.org/10.24926/ijps.v1i1.88>

26. Riane Eisler, “Human Possibilities: The Interaction of Biology and Culture,” in *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1-38, doi: <https://doi.org/10.24926/ijps.v1i1.88>

27. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 35.

to the do-it-yourself spirit that has distinguished zines from other forms of media over time.

Zines already discussed in this chapter like *Voices: Indigenous Voices on the Front Lines Speak* and *I'm Not Ready* exemplify the ways that zines challenge dominator culture by exposing readers to stories that may differ from their own and providing perspectives that may not have been considered otherwise. Their participation in culture, independent of hierarchical structures, establishes them as examples of the partnership model of culture as it pushes against a dominator culture. Other zines, like Claire Kreuger's *Deez Reviews*, use humor to critique dominator culture. A collection of Amazon reviews for various "truck nuts," *Deez Reviews* exposes an absurd cultural affinity for male genitalia that points to larger issues of toxic masculinity within a patriarchal culture. Krueger presents these reviews without commentary, apart from categorization into "good" reviews, "bad" reviews, and "WTF" reviews – the reader arrives at whatever conclusion they want on their own. These reviews cultivate an awareness of a subtle patriarchal phenomenon, revealing an element of dominator culture in which gender and sex-based hierarchies are deeply ingrained.

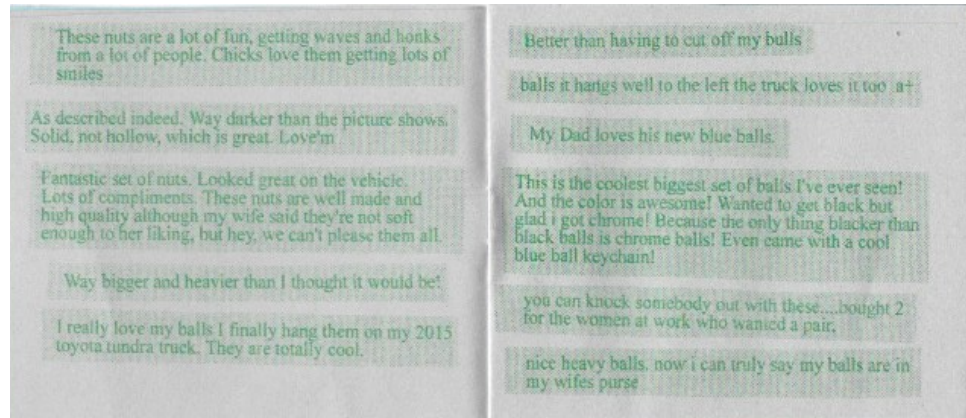


Figure 4: Claire Krueger, pages from *Deez Reviews*, 4.25 x 11 inches.

These three dualities: participatory versus consumer culture, intellectual production versus progressive production apparatuses, and partnership versus dominator culture all go hand in hand with each other as they describe similar but different ways in which hierarchy and hegemony is upheld: through capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist, and classist forces. Zines are among other types of participatory, progressive, and partnership culture that challenges these hierarchies like citizen's radio, artistic practices, and online content creation on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram.

CHAPTER II

INTERSECTION OF ART AND MEDIA

The value of zines as fine art was well established with the curatorial validation of the work by Raymond Pettibon, whose literature-meets-visual art style defined his work in the late-1970s zine *Tripping Corpse* all the way to his blue-chip gallery success today.²⁸ Like Pettibon's work, today's zines still seem to have one foot in print media and another foot in fine art, somehow refusing to adhere to one or the other. This unique interaction has influenced a niche industry of independent artist bookstores where stores like Printed Matter and Quimby's have been established to emphasize the distinct difference that media made by artists have in relation other types of media and other artist-made objects. Though most of the theoretical and critical discourse around zines focuses on their role as media, they need to also be considered art objects that are uniquely situated in the intersections of fine art and media. Though contemporary zines embrace a tone that originated in radically independent participatory media discussed in chapter one, they are in active participation with critical discourse of art institutions, reflect Dadaist attitudes, and bend interpretations of culture to meet their own needs.

28. Robert Storr, "Survey," in *Raymond Pettibon* (New York and London: Phaidon, 2001), 34-72.

Critical Discourse with Art Institutions

Using participatory media to surpass established institutions, the zine engages in a critical discourse, calling into question the hierarchal institutions that provide validity. The anti-art nature of the zine is expressed in other ways, separate from anti-aesthetic visuals. When the 2019 Whitney Biennial was overshadowed by protests calling for Warren Kanders' resignation from the museum's board of directors, multiple artists voiced their dissent over the museum's leadership and the overall lack of accountability.^{29 30 31} In an act of defiance against the assumed sanctity of the museum, the independent publishing house Inpatient Press began distributing L.A. Warman's erotic poetry in untitled chapbook-like zines on Gansevoort Street, facing the Whitney Museum's entrance. When the museum removed the newspaper dispenser, Inpatient Press fought back and made their ensuing confrontations public in a printed poster of their apology letter and reimbursement.³² The newspaper dispenser was placed

29. Zachary Small, "Eight Artists Withdraw Their Work From 2019 Whitney Biennial," Hyperallergic, last modified July 20, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/510167/artists-withdraw-work-from-2019-whitney-biennial/>

30. Korakrit Arunanondchai, Meriem Bennani, Nicole Eisenman, Nicholas Galanin, "A Letter From Artists in the Whitney Biennial," Artforum, last modified July 19, 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/a-letter-from-artists-in-the-whitney-biennial-80361>

31. Hannah Black, Ciarán Finlayson, Tobi Haslett, "The Tear Gas Biennial," Artforum, last modified July 17, 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/hannah-black-ciaran-finlayson-and-tobi-haslett-on-the-2019-whitney-biennial-80328>.

32. Inpatient Press (@inpatient_press), "As some of you might have heard, Inpatient is in the Biennial-ahaha just kidding bc THE WHITNEY MUSEUM ILLEGALLY DESTROYED OUR EROTICA NEWSPAPER MACHINE!! After weeks of back and forth, they finally sent me this cute apology letter and a nice check oh and don't worry we have a brand new fully loaded machine coming right back to ya Happy Friday, instafriends!," Instagram, March 15, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/BvCDVjplxKE/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

back on Gansevoort Street and was accompanied with a second dispenser with the posters detailing the conflict. The dispenser was kept stocked throughout the run of the 2019 Whitney Biennial so that anyone with twenty-five cents could own a copy of the zine. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Inpatient Press intended to keep the dispensers stocked with rotating erotic titles on Gansevoort Street that were humorously explicit,³³ their absurdity amplified by their placement near one of the nation's leading art institutions that would catch the attention of unknowing visitors to the museum and Chelsea's surrounding commercial galleries.

33. Inpatient Press (@inpatient_press), "Happy Valentines Day from Inpatient Press! Our newsbox is now stocked with BUTTHOLES 4 CHEAP, a broadside collaboration between Rin Johnson and @jordanstrafer - featuring an original painting by Jordan on the front and a new verse by Rin on the back that you can memorize (or cut out) and recite to that special someone. Printed in a limited edition of 69, this is the first work to be featured in our 2020 Newsbox Residency, in which invited artists and writers create site specific works for the Inpatient newsboxes located on Gansevoort St. Enjoy," Instagram, February 14, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B8jdemBF1xk/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link



Figure 5: Inpatient Press newspaper dispensers on Gansevoort Street in May 2019, photograph taken by author.

The example provided by Inpatient Press and the Whitney Museum is exceptional, as most zines do not engage in direct dialogue with institutions in the way that Warman's did. Zines typically critique the institutional world of critics, curators, and collectors in a more nuanced manner: in the way they manifest as art objects that need to be held and handled. Their humble bindings and covers resist any sort of commodification and their low monetary value discourages purchasing as an investment that will appreciate. They can't be accurately exhibited in the

traditional gallery space where interaction other than looking is prohibited. Many ignore principles and elements of design that would cause them to be objectively labeled “bad” and others are explicitly crude and offensive. For these reasons, the zine resists anything that traditionally validates the authority of the art object.

Dada Precedents

In chapter one, I discussed the differences between contemporary zines and the widely studied punk zines made in the late twentieth century, concluding that contemporary zines display a markedly different tone than the punk zines that have been heavily studied. Despite a shift in tone, large numbers of contemporary zines still maintain a punk-like style that has been interpreted as merely tradition, stemming from no longer relevant deterministic factors within the punk zine’s origins. Teal Triggs, in a summary of the historic origins of punk zines in the 1970s’ United Kingdom, notes the lack of resources as a contributing factor to the visual appearance of the zine, writing: “Punk supported a growing ‘DIY’ attitude that did not necessarily require ‘thousands of pounds of equipment’... For the most part, all that was required of a fanzine producer was access to a typewriter, a photocopy machine, scissors, a few felt tip markers, a bit of imagination and an audience of like-minded individuals.”³⁴ The original punk zines were made with handwritten or typewritten text, found collaged imagery, and graphic forms made from Sharpie ink that were then photocopied and assembled without any formal

34. Teal Triggs, "Typo-Anarchy: A New Look at the Fanzine Revolution," in *The Magazine: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Gwen Allen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, Whitechapel Gallery, 2016), 133-137.

binding. Today, these primitive materials aren't necessary when considering advances in production technology – with digital technology more widely available than ever before, zine makers can continue to keep production costs low with more advanced technology, which one would imagine would contribute to a more polished appearance. Some certainly have taken advantage of this. Still though, many makers prefer the grunge-y appearance that the now-irrelevant process provides. These zines exhibit an anti-aesthetic to the point that some are illegible or incoherent. The eye is forced to bounce around the page as it searches for visual cues that could provide a non-existent focal point, producing an anxiety in the reader as they search for answers within the pages. What the persistence of this style tells us today is that what may have been considered deterministic factors were never coincidental in that they just happened to establish a style, but instead point to a very deliberate intention to position the zine as anti-art.

The anti-art stance of the zine places it within the ranks of the Dada movement of the early twentieth century. In the same ways in which the Dadaists reacted against the destruction of World War I, contemporary zines are reacting against today's late capitalist culture, technological advances, political divisions, and climate change that make the logic of mainstream art seem futile. We see adjacent attitudes in Benjamin's "The Author as Producer," discussed in chapter one, as Benjamin critiques the sense and order of an intellectual production apparatus that keeps truly progressive culture from reaching audiences. These attitudes converge in the zine, where titles like Laura Grace Ford's *Savage Messiah* bypass the intellectual production apparatus to critique the perceived

sense and order of surrounding social and political developments using the anti-aesthetic established by punk zines.

Savage Messiah documents the gentrification of London's neighborhoods in preparation for the 2012 Olympics. The pages of the multiple-issue zine are full of collaged images of graffiti and trash, typewritten poetry, hand drawn portraits, and handwritten musings that range in legibility. *Savage Messiah* explores and documents parts of London that city guides won't touch, parts that the city doesn't want its then-anticipated Olympic visitors to see. *Savage Messiah* resists any sort of desire for it as an object in the sloppy and amateur way that the zine is made, with scratchy writing, grainy and blurry photographs, and rough edges on pages collaged together; reflecting a similar resistance in the neighborhoods that face a looming threat gentrification and "urban renewal."

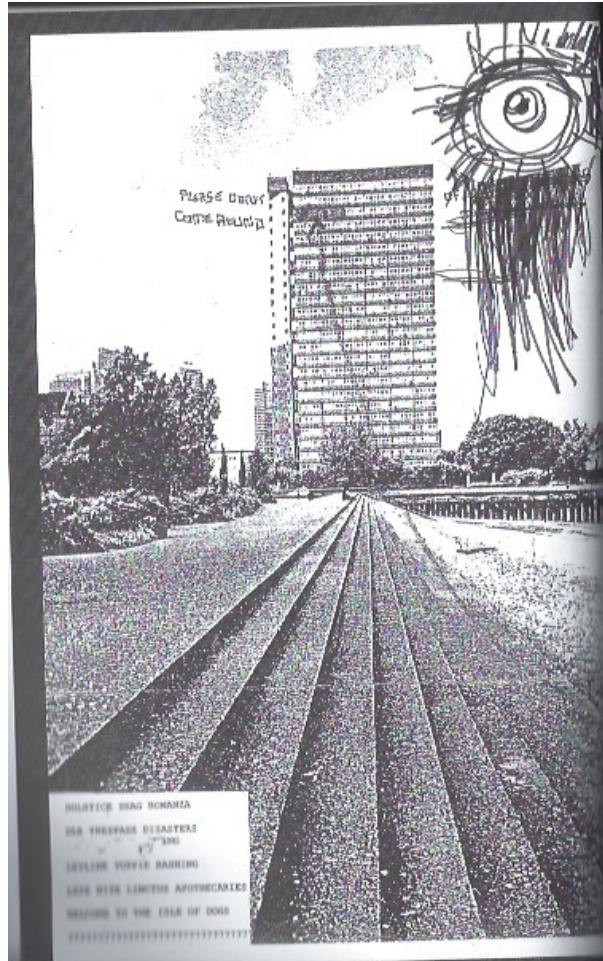


Figure 6: Laura Grace Ford, page from *Savage Messiah #1*, 2006, 8.5 x 5.5

Disidentifications with Culture

The zines appropriation of found imagery has long been documented with collaged compositions being an integral part of the punk zine's anti-aesthetic and have remained mainstays in the process for makers. The *grrrl* zines that originated in the 1990s embraced the found image collage, drawing on the traditionally feminine-coded crafts of scrapbooking, album-making, and paper collage. This use of existing culture to create new meanings has been noted by multiple scholars and given multiple names. Janice Radway refers to this practice as

“insubordinate creativity” in which the self constructs identity using materials already available.³⁵ Jose Esteban Muñoz takes this a step further, describing a necessity for the semantic rearrangement of existing culture. Muñoz defines “disidentification” as “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”³⁶

Alisha Walker’s *A Survivor* works in dialogue with the Old Testament story of Judith beheading Holofernes told through the paintings of Artemisia Gentileschi. In 2014, Walker, while working as an escort, was attacked by a client. In self-defense, she took her attacker’s knife and stabbed him, saving herself and another escort. As of July 2020, Walker is still in prison. The cover of *A Survivor* features three of Gentileschi’s paintings collaged together: *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (c. 1620), *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (c. 1623-1625), and *Judith and her Maidservant* (c. 1610). The zine is filled with Walker’s poetry, writing, and illustrations, including a “Letter to the Governor” where Walker details multiple events that led to her sentencing, including inappropriate conduct from her lawyers and a conflict-of-interest involving the victim’s sister. Through Walker’s personal story, the context of the collage becomes clear even to those unfamiliar with Gentileschi’s work or the story of Judith. The story of Judith is transformed from one of revenge to that of radical self-defense. Walker makes the scope

35. Alison Piepmeier, *Grrrl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 34.

36. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

of criminalized sex work known as Judith is multiplied and represented four times within the composition while her maidservant, Abra, makes five women working in solidarity. The physical reproducibility of the zine exponentially increases the presence of these women, further calling attention to the thousands of women incarcerated after acting in self-defense. Unable to find accurate representations of herself in media and culture, Walker has disidentified with the story of Judith to fit her own reality.



Figure 7: Alisha Walker, cover of *A Survivor*, 8.5 x 5

CHAPTER III

MATERIALITY

The physical presence of the zine is its most striking characteristic – the covers, binding, and pages invite readers without feeling intimidating through their humble materiality. Rich experiences come from exploring collections in libraries and stores where the object can be interacted with and compared in relation to others. For those unable to access these spaces, receiving zines through the mail can be thrilling. Decorated envelopes and the inclusion of seemingly unrelated ephemera makes receiving mail exciting and enhances the reader’s experience. The zine is meant to be held and read, not viewed from afar, behind a stanchion, or on a screen. There are, of course, some exceptions. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, publishing zines digitally was simply the safest option to continue making, sharing, and communicating. Digital programs that mimic the action of page-turning can help the digital zine retain some of its characteristics present in its physical form. In most cases, digital publishing seems like the most logical step: If digital programs are so accessible that they are used to design today’s zines, why not skip the step of printing, binding, and distributing? Why not take advantage of easier and cheaper systems? And when a zine is published digitally, does anything distinguish it from forms of communication that are native to the digital landscape?

In 2017, the twentieth anniversary edition of Stephen Duncombe's *Notes from Underground* came out with a new afterword titled "Do Zines Still Matter?" Reflecting twenty years later, Duncombe contrasts the way that zine aesthetics remain unchanged while self-publishing has changed with the rise of electronic media. He argues: "One could plausibly argue that blogs are just ephemeral [personal zines], and fan sites on the web are nothing other than digitally displayed fanzines. Perhaps the only thing that separates a zine from all these new forms of computer-mediated communication is the medium."³⁷ Blogs, like zines, occur independently. Like zines, the barrier of entry for a blogger is relatively low. Similarly, the blogger does not need their work approved by any outside source based on their social capital, wealth, or authority. Because the blog, like the zine, is not produced for its money-making ability, it can be pursued without needing to appeal to marketing groups. Based on these similarities, are blogs the digital era's version of the zine and can zines still exist separately in unison with new digital mediums?

Alison Piepmeier also addresses the apparent non-difference between the blog and the zine. Noting the apparent similarities, Piepmeier acknowledges that many of those who make zines also run blogs (and in 2020, we can also include microblogging platforms like Twitter and Instagram), thereby implying a difference between the two. Piepmeier also notes that "the internet is a space that replicates many of the structural

³⁷ Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 218.

inequities of the nondigital world.”³⁸ The internet is a hostile place for women; a study found that chatroom users with feminine names got 25 times more threatening and sexually explicit messages.³⁹ For women, and especially for LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC women and gender-nonconforming groups, it is significantly safer to have a presence in zines than it is on the internet. Makers and independent distributors write P.O. boxes in returns addresses, making doxing nearly impossible. If anyone really wanted to harass the maker, they would have to find the right address, write a letter, buy postage, and mail their letter – something significantly more involved than leaving an anonymous hateful comment or message on the internet. Furthermore, the content of some zines may not be allowed on blogging platforms. Instagram’s community guidelines frequently cause accounts sharing explicit content to be banned and tend to be indiscriminate in what they deem explicit or not. The importance of the safety of zines in relation to identity and social justice movements is discussed at length in chapter four, but it is worth noting the added safety in zines when examining the practical reasons behind their seemingly anachronistic material presence.

If the only thing that separates zines from computer-mediated communication like blogs is the medium, then the materiality of the zine is crucially important in that it significantly impacts the reading experience, fosters human connection through bodily experience, and facilitates a technological

38. Alison Piepmeier, *Grrrl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 15.

39. Alison Piepmeier, *Grrrl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 15.

reproducibility that imbues the zine with a political value, thus establishing the zine as a genuinely progressive form of art.

Content, material, form, and meaning all need to be defined in the context of zines before going further. Content is what is directly on the page of the zine – text, images, illustrations. Additionally, some zine makers package and ship their zines with a variety of esoteric ephemera that can be interpreted as content as well. For example, a recent package of zines I received from Claire Krueger included a Halloween-themed sticker sheet and blank Valentine's Day cards. Duncombe calls this practice of ephemera trading “reveling in disorder” and describes his own experience in receiving a zine packaged with “a NASA photo of Saturn, an official memo form filled out with a nonsensical rant, and a card explaining the germination process of lawn grass.”⁴⁰ Like the content printed on the page, the ephemera sometimes included can make up the content of the zine and should be analyzed as such, as they are intentionally packaged with the zine.

Material is the physical medium that makes the zine. Broadly, that is paper and ink. Specifically, it can also include crayon, graphite, permanent marker, et cetera. Similarly, form is the way the zine manifests. It is the binding, the sequence of pages, and the way the materials used interact with one another. Some zines are printed on a single eight and one half by eleven inch sheet and folded into eight pages. Others are printed as half-sheets, folded and stapled, or printed and folded like newspapers. All of these forms influence the way the zine is interacted with and read – a small zine may be handled as an intimate object while a zine printed on newsprint may feel less precious given the

40. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 37.

ephemeral nature associated with the traditional newspaper. Material and form are “read” just as much as the content is and are combined to create meaning. That is, the information, ideas, and concepts that are revealed through the zine. Because the material and form contribute so heavily in addition to content to the meaning of the zine, it is imperative that the zine be understood in its original conception as a material object.

Material Impact on Reading Experience

In their introduction to *Reading Books*, Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles discuss the impact of physicality on the understanding of the book: “When we read books, we really read *books* - that is, we read the physicality of materiality of the book as well as and in relation to the text itself. Literacy, then, may be said to include not only textual competence but material competence, an ability to read the semiotics of the concrete forms that embody, shape, and condition the meanings of texts.”⁴¹ Duncombe’s point is correct, blogs and fan sites contain much of the same content of zines. However, as Moylan and Stiles’ argument clarifies, even if the content is the same across different media, the meaning cannot be if the content is not interpreted in the original form intended by the maker. If the maker did not intend for their zine to be read digitally, it will not have the same effect on a digital platform.

Ulises Carrión makes a case for the importance of form in his 1980 essay “Bookworks Revisited” in which he discusses mail and book art as forms of print media. We can apply this discussion to zines for while not all mail or book art consists of zines,

41. Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles, introduction to *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America*, ed. Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles (University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 5.

much of the small booklets that are circulated by mail artists and book artists can be classified as such. Carrión puts forth a general definition of the book as a coherent series of pages, all of which must be sequential. Further, the three-dimensional structure of the book, with its sequence of pages, indicates the element of time is present in the reading of a book, bringing the book into both the realm of the spatial and the temporal.⁴²

Carrión is reluctant to call books made by artists “book art” or “mail art” and instead prefers “bookworks,” as the term underscores the form of the book. He defines bookworks as “books in which the book form, a coherent sequence of pages, determines the conditions of reading that are intrinsic to the work.”⁴³ Bookworks, according to Carrión, must embody a relationship between content and form to create a “rhythm” so that the work cannot but exist as a book. While Carrión never explicitly makes an argument for the zine, his definition of the bookwork is in line with Moylan and Stiles’ interpretation of reading that stresses the importance of the form as much as the content. The zine, with its sequence of pages and its rhythm from that sequence, occupies the space of the bookwork and can thus be categorized within the realm of the related book art and mail art.

Therefore, even though the content of zines can be displayed elsewhere (such as the blog or the fan site that Duncombe and Piepmeier discuss), the meaning of the content can only be expressed through the unique physical quality of the material and form.

While bound zine anthologies, PDFs, or other non-material or non-original formats may

42. Ulises Carrión, “Bookworks Revisited,” *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 11, no. 1 (1980): 6-9, doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44130703>.

43. Ulises Carrión, “Bookworks Revisited,” *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 11, no. 1 (1980): 6-9, doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44130703>.

exist, their content alone is not what determines their qualification as zine. It is instead the sculptural quality of the physical object, with its emphasis on craft and material. Digital media have not made the zine obsolete. Instead, it has made the zine more novel and important than before in the understanding of how the form of cultural exchange can influence the ideas that it communicates.

Zines as Human

The zine should be understood as a visual and sculptural media that act as an extension of the body. By providing a human connection through the physical form, zines “instigate intimate, affectionate connections between their creators and readers.”⁴⁴ These human connections can come from multiple sources, all made possible by the material nature of the zine. I mentioned earlier touches like decorated envelopes and the inclusion of ephemeral “gifts” in packages that facilitated feelings of comradeship between the artist and the recipient. Other small details like handwritten edition numbers can imbue the zine with a human connection: I recently received Devin N. Morris’ *Baltimore Boy* which had my name handwritten on the back in lieu of an edition number. The connections between creators and readers create a community dependent on the collective humanity of its members, a humanity that is underscored by the handmade nature of the zine. This community is what Piepmeier calls an “embodied community” in which the reader interacts with the artist and the artifact of their craft.⁴⁵

44. Alison Piepmeier, “Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of Embodied Community,” *American Periodicals* 18, no. 2 (2008): 213 – 238, doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41219799>

45. Alison Piepmeier, “Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of Embodied Community,” *American Periodicals* 18, no. 2 (2008): 213 – 238, doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41219799>



Figure 8: Devin N. Morris, cover of *Baltimore Boy*, 2020, 8.5 x 5.5 inches.

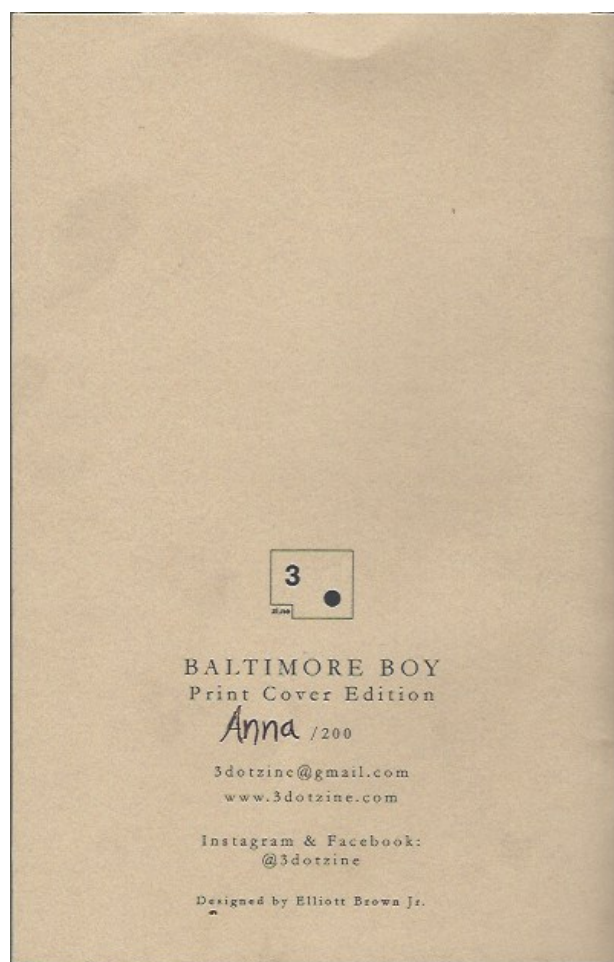


Figure 9: Devin N. Morris, back of author's copy of *Baltimore Boy*, 2020, 8.5 x 5.5 inches.

The *East Village Inky*, a periodical zine by Ayun Halliday, presents a strong example for the importance of materiality as an extension of the human. At five and one half by four and one quarter inches, the *East Village Inky* is half the size of a standard zine. The handwritten and photocopied pages of the *East Village Inky* are crammed full of illustrations and musings, giving the zine a meaning that could not exist in a typed print or online format. In her analysis of an edition of the *Inky*, Piepmeier writes:

A simple reprinting of Halliday's words would be inadequate to convey what is happening on the page. The reader's eyes are forced to move around in different ways than the normal linear print narrative demands. It is unclear what follows what - the chaos of the household she describes is recreated in the wandering sentence structure as well as the visual components of the zine.⁴⁶

The pages of the *East Village Inky*, written with Halliday's unique cadence, mannerisms, and handwriting, turn the zine into an extension of Halliday's body, providing readers with the sense of human connection in an otherwise inanimate object. Every bit of space is used on the pages, calling attention to the limitation and material nature of the physical object. Despite her busy lifestyle that is visually represented in the crowded pages of her personal zine, Halliday makes space for the reader. She wishes her subscribers a happy birthday, thanks them for their loyalty, and uses a vocabulary that only frequent and loyal readers would understand. Through this, the reader, though one of

46. Ibid.

several hundred, feels special. Without knowing the other readers of the zine or even Halliday herself, the reader becomes part of a camaraderie that exists within the imagination.

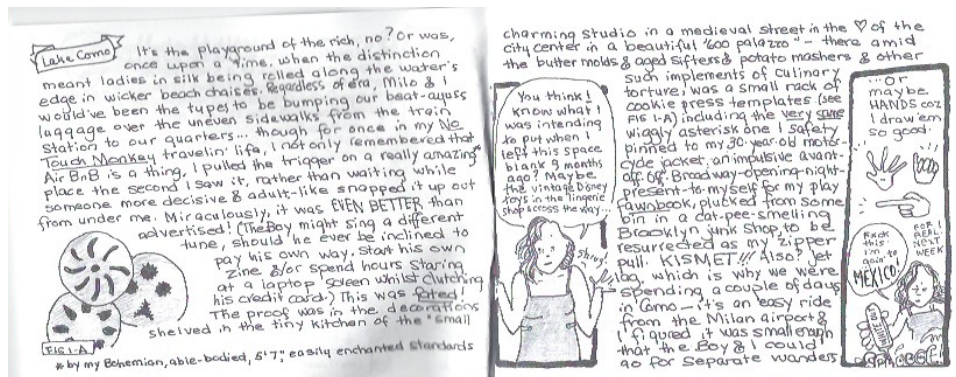


Figure 10: Ayun Halliday, pages from *East Village Inky* #59, 2018, 11 x 4.25 inches.

The style of the *East Village Inky* reflects the anti-aesthetic of zines discussed in chapter two. The informal quality facilitated by this anti-aesthetic makes the zine feel more personal, treating readers like equal members of Piepmeier's embodied community. Communities of content makers and their followers seem more common in digital media like YouTube or Instagram than they do in subscription-based zines like the *East Village Inky*. Halliday herself could publish her zine's content on a blog but chooses to use physical media to deliver a material object to her subscribers.

In issue 59, Halliday's stream-of-consciousness, almost amateur writing style is celebrated as the cover proudly boasts that this edition has the "longest run on sentence in

our nearly 20 year history!”⁴⁷ The zine reads like a personal diary as Halliday recounts her trip to Italy, bringing up characters from her life that only long-time *East Village Inky* subscribers would know or remember. Her writing is casual as she recalls visiting the art museum in Bergamo. She writes: “We trawled the galleries for close to two hours, improvising our own BuzzFeed Ugly Renaissance Babies Who Can’t Even-style commentary. Does this put us in the ugly American camp? WWJD if he heard us mocking his infant likeness?”⁴⁸ In many pages, she leaves spaces for illustrations filled in with comic thought-bubbles acknowledging her failure to remember what she planned to draw in that space.

The candor in Halliday’s writing is punctuated by the visual appearance of the *East Village Inky*. She uses her own handwriting and evidence of her errors and corrections are present in the finished zine. By commercial publishing standards, the *East Village Inky* appears unprofessional, unrefined, and possibly even low brow. For its readers, however, the zine represents a down-to-earth authenticity. In an age where computer algorithms are being programmed to write convincingly legitimate sentences in our emails and text messages, there is a certain comfort that can be taken in knowing definitively that the text being read was written by a human being – a characteristic stressed by the bodily nature of handwritten text.

47. Ayun Halliday, *East Village Inky* #59, 2018.

48. Ayun Halliday, *East Village Inky* #59, 2018.

Technological Reproducibility

It is this exact characteristic – the obvious human hand, the artifact of craft – that makes zines feel approachable, that encourages readers to participate in the culture and make their own zines. This collaborative, action-oriented nature is what Walter Benjamin discusses in his 1934 essay “The Author as Producer.” The value of work produced by a proletariat and for a proletariat is further explored by Benjamin in his 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility,” in which the deterioration of the unique art object’s “aura” is analyzed by exploring the sociohistorical changes that defined the modern era in art. He traces the reproducibility of the art object and thus the deterioration of its aura to a shift from the art object having ritualistic or cult value to having political value. For Benjamin, the advent of photography was the start of this shift: as artworks lost market value as unique pieces, they gained political value.⁴⁹ Technological reproducibility has extended far beyond photography in the digital age and Benjamin’s argument takes on extreme relevance today.

In an analysis of punk zines of the 1970s, Teal Triggs writes: “The process of reproduction ‘democratized’ access, but at the same, each copy became further removed from its original quality. It was this aspect that Punk accepted as desirable.”⁵⁰ This democratization of access is a direct result of the technological reproducibility of the zine, and we see this technological reproducibility embodied in *Men Who Memorize*

49. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility Second Edition," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2008), 19-55.

50. Teal Triggs, "Typo-Anarchy: A New Look at the Fanzine Revolution," in *The Magazine: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Gwen Allen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, Whitechapel Gallery, 2016), 133-137.

Number Two: Epigenetics. The black-and-white, photocopied collage zine in which the artist, Nicole Dimitrov, ruminates on the lives of the women in her family uses the technique of cut, paste, and photocopy that is typical of punk zines. Dimitrov uses found imagery collaged with handwritten script and occasional printed or typed letters. Images range from those found in family photo albums to newspaper clippings, television screenshots, softcore porn, and floral imagery. On one page, Dimitrov uses red crayon to color on top of a photocopied image, imbuing the zine with even more human connection than the handmade but reproduced collage could.

The zine begins by discussing the scientific genealogical study of epigenetics - that is, the study of inheritance by mechanisms other than the DNA sequence of genes. In 2018, an epigenetic study concluded that trauma could leave a chemical mark on a person's genes, altering the mechanism by which the gene is expressed. Dimitrov abstracts this discovery by comparing herself to a matryoshka doll, containing experiences of the women before her like the matryoshka contains similar dolls, thus making the matryoshka a metaphor of

intergenerational trauma. The gritty beauty in the black-and-white floral motifs that decorate the pages are in line with the heart-breaking tales of the artist's great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother. *Epigenetics* presents a story of forgiveness, as the artist writes: "Maureen i had your wedding dress remade and my mother didn't talk to me for two years."⁵¹

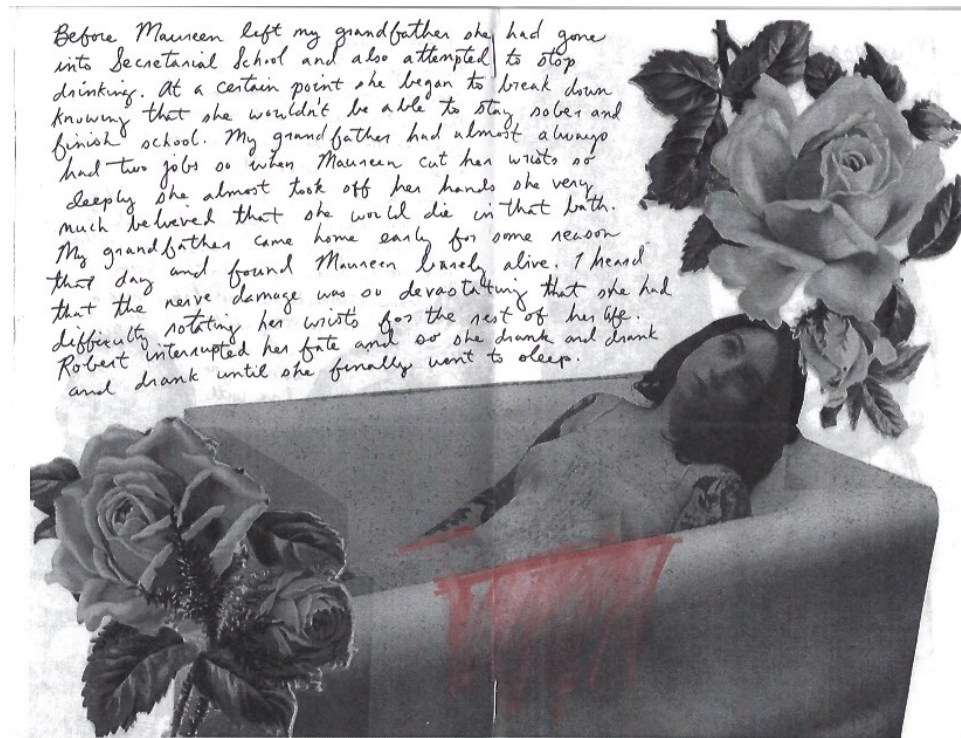


Figure 11: Nicole Dimitrov, pages from *Men Who Memorize Number Two: Epigenetics*, 8.5 x 11 inches.

At the end of *Epigenetics*, movie scenes are collaged together. The subtitles of the top scene read "Do you realize that I know you as four entirely different people?" while the bottom reads "Which one do you think is real?" In between these scenes, Dimitrov

51. Nicole Dimitrov, *Men Who Memorize Number Two: Epigenetics*

marks the zine's edition number, out of fifty. While these movie scenes are meant to reference the four women Dimitrov feels that she carries inside of her, the bottom scene can also reference how the act of copying the zine removes it from its original manuscript. With each copy of *Epigenetics*, the value of the single object reduces and the authority of the original deteriorates. The physical reproduction of the zine underscores the meaning as each copy becomes further detached from the original. This physical representation of reproduction becomes a metaphor for the manifestation of genetic inheritance. As each copy shares a common ancestor and characteristics, they remain unique and yet related.

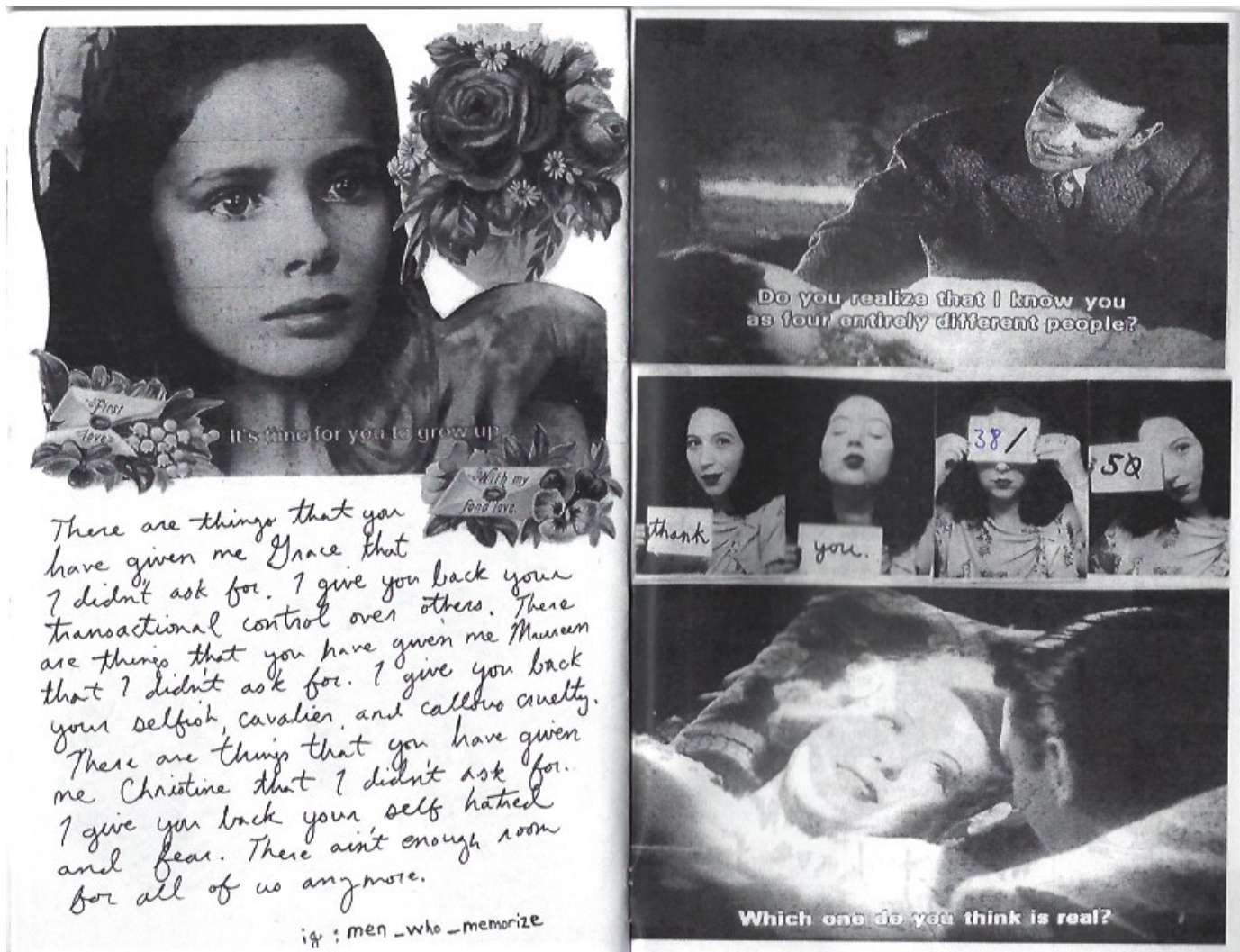


Figure 12: Nicole Dimitrov, pages from *Men Who Memorize Number Two: Epigenetics*, 8.5 x 11 inches.

CHAPTER IV

ZINES AS RADICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE TOOLS

The independent and participatory nature of zines provides an ideal environment for voices that are not deemed acceptable or worthy by consumer media to make themselves heard. This includes but is not limited to black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), members of the LGBTQIA+ community, incarcerated people, people with disabilities and chronic illness, and the working class. These voices are poised to take advantage of the cultural production apparatuses that Walter Benjamin describes when he advocates for cultural production via the proletariat in *The Author as Producer*. In chapter one, I argued for the application of Benjamin's theory of progressive culture to zines. That is: as long as an intellectual class (today we can interpret this as a privileged class) is in control of production apparatuses, nothing that they produce can be truly progressive even if it appears to be. Zines, as cultural objects that are independent of traditional intellectual production apparatuses, occupy the space of progressive culture. Part of what makes this culture progressive is the uncensored inclusion of the voices mentioned earlier – voices that aren't represented or even allowed to present themselves on their own terms in consumer media.

In my research, almost all the zines that I have encountered have carried either explicit or implied third-wave and even fourth-wave feminist attitudes that value intersectionality in the understanding of gender, sexuality, race, and class within discussions of radically progressive politics.

The contemporary zine's emphasis on feminist values position them as descendants from the Riot Grrrl movement that is often framed as an offshoot of punk zines. In the late twentieth-century, the Riot Grrrl movement emerged from women who felt the punk music scene was an inequitable, patriarchal space. The grrrl zines that came out of this movement carried overt feminist tones in ways that mixed the personal and political. In the 2009 book *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* – the first and only study of zines independent of movements predominantly occupied by male artists, and the most recent major study of zines I have found – Alison Piepmeier makes an argument for grrrl zines as separate from punk and traces their contributions to third-wave feminist theory production, writing:

The idea of zines as sites of theory production may be somewhat surprising, as theory is generally associated with elitist academic practices, and zines occupy the opposite end of the spectrum, so intentionally low brow as to be able to be mistaken for trash... Since its inception, feminist theory has existed in a state of uneasy tension: theory requires a certain degree of abstraction, but feminist practices have rightly demanded attention to material origins and conditions that are particularized... Zines up the ante on this tension because they are intensely and intentionally local, individualized, and eccentric... Grrrl zines' negotiations... of the specific and the generalizable – their sometimes messy careening between the local and the global, the personal and the political – are a process by which third wave theory is produced.⁵²

52. Alison Piepmeier, *Grrrl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 10.

In my own research of zines that are primarily made after the 2016 United States presidential election reveal trends in today's zines as sites for oppressed minorities to voice their thoughts and opinions that position them in a similar tension with the specific and the generalizable that Piepmeier writes about. As material objects that act as bodily extensions that initiate human connection, zines are inherently personal. The stories within them, however, tend to have broad political themes. Zines already discussed like *I'm Not Ready*, *Voices: Indigenous Women on the Front Lines Speak*, *Survivance*, and *A Survivor* embody a personalization of politics that position zines as tools for social justice as they create community out of decentralized movements, combat misrepresentation, and provide safe spaces for theory production and discussion.

Community Creation

In the digital age, communities have undergone a major decentralization at the expense of the globalized internet. Websites and smartphone apps can bring people together with similar identities regardless of geographic area. Alienated minority groups living out of reach of major coastal cities in the United States can find a safe and supporting space that validates their emotions and experience. However, these minority groups in alienated spaces may still lack Piepmeier's embodied community discussed in chapter three - a community held together by intimate and affectionate connections.⁵³ The material zine provides a way to facilitate these embodied communities for wherever the

53. Alison Piepmeier, "Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of Embodied Community," *American Periodicals* 18, no. 2 (2008): 213 – 238, doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41219799>

internet can reach, the postal service can as well to fill in the gaps that online communities cannot.

In Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities*, he defines a nation as "an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."⁵⁴ While zines do not create nations bound to the geographic or ethnographic identities that Anderson goes on to discuss, the imagined communities they create and support are based on identity of a different, but emotionally legitimate sort. Anderson gives the example of readers of newspaper that we can apply to zine readers:

... The newspaper is merely an 'extreme form' of the book, a book sold on a colossal scale, but of ephemeral popularity. We know that particular morning and evening editions will overwhelmingly be consumed between this hour and that, only on this day, not that... [The ritual of reading] is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet whose identity he has not the slightest notion.⁵⁵

Having this sort of imagined comradeship is essential for the mental health and wellbeing of alienated minority. In a 2011 survey on transgender and gender non-conforming discrimination, 41% of transgender and gender non-conforming respondents reported attempting suicide compared to 1.6% of the general population. Further, the survey found that over half of those who were bullied or harassed in school attempted suicide. When

54. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 6.

55. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), 35.

broken down by race, the demographic with the highest rate of suicide attempt was American Indian respondents with 56% reporting and the demographic with the lowest rate of suicide attempt was white respondents with 38% reporting. This disparity reflects layers of alienation where white transgender and gender non-conforming groups may only feel alienated based on one identity, while BIPOC groups feel alienated based on multiple identities. While there are major systemic factors that contribute to these rates, it cannot be ignored that feelings of alienation can come from the severe emotional distress and loss in major life areas that the National Institute for Mental Health reports as factors leading to suicide attempts.⁵⁶

It would be naive to assume that the zine could solve massive, systemically ingrained issues like high suicide rates. But the popularity of zines in decentralized minority spaces attests to their legitimacy as sources of embodied community through their imagined readership and human connection via material. *Survivance*, a multi-issue zine published by the artist initiative R.I.S.E, attests to this legitimacy. The zine explicitly acknowledges the alienation of a decentralized minority in its introduction, stating: “this collection of poetry... acts as a bridge between Indigenous tribes from the colonized lands of Canada and the United States of America.”⁵⁷ With the intention to “heal, inform, empower, and mobilize Indigenous communities,”⁵⁸ *Survivance* employs its materiality to construct and strengthen an identity-based community across geographic borders.

56. Jaime M. Grant, PhD et al, “Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey,” DataSpace, National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2011, <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp014j03d232p>

57. *Survivance vol. IV*, (R.I.S.E.: Radical Indigenous Survivance & Empowerment, 2019), vii.

58. *Survivance vol. IV*, (R.I.S.E.: Radical Indigenous Survivance & Empowerment, 2019), vii.

Correcting Misrepresentations

Through the concentration of media ownership, so much of what consumers see, hear, and read is controlled by a small group of people that do not represent the actual demographic makeup of their audience. The danger of the concentration of media ownership is a tendency toward “North-South inequities in media and information systems which... [are] designed to serve the interests of Western military powers and transnational corporations.”⁵⁹ The resultant bias in news and information has “serious negative impact on national identity, cultural integrity and political and economic sovereignty.”⁶⁰ These findings, reported by UNESCO’s MacBride Commission Report and published in 1980, are profound and still important forty years later. Given understandings of intersectional feminist theory, we can infer that there are far more types of identity – not just national identity – that are at risk of serious negative impact from biased and concentrated media.

One of these impacts seen today is a variety of misrepresentations in media. Too often, women, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+, and disabled people are tokenized, generalized, and stereotyped in books, movies and television, radio, and magazines. Tropes like the gay best friend, the manic pixie dream girl, and the angry black woman are seen again and again in addition to a variety of other racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist representations. When media impact the way we shape our worldview and informs our

59. Clemencia Rodríguez and Dorothy Kidd, "Volume I Introduction," in *Making Our Media: Global Initiatives Toward a Democratic Public Sphere*, ed. Clemencia Rodríguez, Dorothy Kidd, and Laura Stein (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press Inc., 2010), 1-22.

60. Clemencia Rodríguez and Dorothy Kidd, "Volume I Introduction," in *Making Our Media: Global Initiatives Toward a Democratic Public Sphere*, ed. Clemencia Rodríguez, Dorothy Kidd, and Laura Stein (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press Inc., 2010), 1-22.

opinions on groups that we may have little contact with otherwise, the way people are represented makes a difference in impacting the way we move through the world. An easy solution to this is presented: provide more representation of minority groups.

Of course, when representation is done the right way, the positive impact can be great. The problem comes, however, when in attempt to fairly represent, media misrepresents or presents a single-story bias because actual members of the group that are being represented are not able to present themselves on their own terms. Correct representation of minority groups is few and far between and often the harmful image is “merely traded for another, the new one perhaps a little kinder, a little gentler.”⁶¹ Zines combat this issue through their inherent involvement in participatory media. The zine allows cultural creators to not have to rely on approval from a commercial arts, television, or publishing industry. They do not have to tailor their content to fit into a certain “brand” or “voice,” nor do they have to rely on systems that tokenize and exploit them. The value of this is exemplified in *Voices: Indigenous Women on the Front Lines Speak* - which I mentioned in my discussion of participatory media in chapter one - where small editorial choices like the selective capitalization of certain locations promotes a necessary awareness of the colonial impacts in our relationship with the land we live on.

Maddy Court’s *Choose Your Own Dykeventure* combats biased LGBTQIA+ representation through the reclaiming of stereotypes. Based on the Choose Your Own Adventure genre, *Choose Your Own Dykeventure* puts the reader into the shoes of a queer

61. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 131.

woman navigating a tricky dating landscape. Court's characters embody stereotypes of the contemporary queer women: they have an affinity for houseplants, shop at grocery co-ops, drink non-dairy milks, and take camping trips together. The story is steered by selections made by the reader as they take on the identity of an unnamed queer women, only referred to as "you." Stereotypes are stacked on top of each other, culminating in absurd situations like summoning "Griz the Sewer Dyke" and asking her to return a lost phone. These scenarios would undoubtedly come across as offensive if made into major television network sitcom storylines or *Saturday Night Live* sketches. Coming from an independent queer voice, however, the stories have an ironic humor rather than an offensive tone. Court's jokes aren't made at the expense of queer women. Instead, they unify the queer woman experience through their highly relatable nature and reclaim the word "dyke," denying it any derogatory power to be used by a phobic majority.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. You accept Alex's help. Together, you and Alex look into the grate and say the words "Griz the Sewer Dyke" three times.

Griz appears in a puff of smoke. Her skin is green and she's wearing a denim jumpsuit. She speaks with a Jersey accent and exudes competence.

"Why have you mortal dykes summoned me?" she asks.

You explain the situation with your phone and the sewer grate.

"Yes, I will rescue your phone and the text messages you so desire. However, you must do something for me in return."

"Yes, anything," you say.

"When my ex-wife moved out, she took the kids and all my DVDs. Sewer wifi is too spotty to stream anything and I'm so overdue for a rewatch of my favorite show--the Starz original series, *Vida*. Bring seasons one and two of *Vida* on DVD," says Griz.

"That seems more than fair. How do I get it to you?"

"Just chuck it into the sewer when the new moon is in Pisces. If you want to get me a case of Stella, that would be nice too."

You and Griz strike a deal and in a flash, your phone is aboveground again.

"Thank you, Griz the Sewer Dyke," you say, but she's already gone.

You feel someone squeeze your hand. It's Alex. You've been holding hands this whole time.

*To keep your promise to Griz the Sewer Dyke, go to page 27
To break your promise to Griz the Sewer Dyke, go to page 29*

Figure 13: Maddy Court, page from *Choose Your Own Dykeventure*, 2020, 8.5 x 11 inches.

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The dyke drama is too much for you right now. You need to be alone in your room, where it's safe.

You shut the door and close the curtains. Then you load a whimsical blend of lavender and clary sage into the essential oil diffuser and flop onto your bed. What are you going to do next? The possibilities are myriad. You could watch porn and masturbate in the glow of 100 tea lights. You could play *Stardew Valley* with no pants on. You can do a face mask, paint your nails, rotate your houseplants, rearrange the furniture, flip through an art book, write a letter to an old friend, dress your cat in baby clothes, lick a Himalayan salt lamp, FaceTime your long-distance crush, scroll through Petfinder, drink tea, journal, start a podcast, donate to a trans person's survival fund, or read your horoscope. You could smoke a joint and KonMari all your clothes, then order pizza and dust off the old magic wand. You could shop for velvet paintings on eBay, watch an episode of *Celebrity Ghost Stories* or *My Big Fat Pet Makeover*, do a R-rated photoshoot for your friends, eat hot chips, revise your screenplay, meditate, post a personal ad on Lex, search for new and exciting garlic bread recipes, make a list of everyone you've ever boned, or read through embarrassing old iPhone notes. You could take a nap and have a sexy lucid dream. Do whatever you want. It's your room. You can stay here for as long as you want. You'll get back out there when you're ready.

THE END

Figure 14: Maddy Court, page from *Choose Your Own Dykeventure*, 2020, 8.5 x 11 inches.

Safety in Print

In places where certain minority identities may be legally or socially dangerous, zines are safe way to produce and consume media that validates a minority experience.

Their limited print run may guarantee that few people see the zine (Duncombe's survey estimates an average circulation of two hundred and fifty copies per title),⁶² but it also guarantees a low chance of the zine getting into the wrong hands. The distribution of zines, though more accessible than ever before, is still relatively underground with discovery relying on networks and chance encounters. In my research, nearly all my encounters have been facilitated by Instagram's story function, in-person recommendations, and internet algorithm rabbit holes. This method of discovery is certainly unique to the geographic barriers I and many others in the southern and Midwest United States face by being relatively isolated from a larger creative scene in coastal cities. When visiting these coastal cities, I have certainly had richer and markedly easier experiences discovering zines; an observation worth noting when considering how the value and validity of zines may vary across different regions. When considering the cosmopolitan nature of coastal cities, it makes sense that zines are easier to find, whereas more homogeneous regions would require minority identities to be quieter about their media for the sake of the safety of their community.

Tom Boellstorff's study of *gay* zines in Indonesia reveals a need for the LGBTQIA+ community to discreetly express their thoughts and opinions in a climate where being "out" is not socially possible. He writes:

On the eastern coast of the island of Borneo, in the city of Samarinda, is a network of *gay* men... On this day, I am sitting in the windowless, rented room of Haru, a man from Java, when he removes a worn copy of *GAYa Nusantara* from a small locked cupboard. He shares each new addition with *gay* friends, including Awi, an ethnic Banjar from Samarinda who lives with his sister and her husband and children. None of these family

62. Steven Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 15.

members know that Awi is *gay*, but Awi tells me that when he reads *GAYa Nusantara* he is not alone.⁶³

Boellstorff describes the genre of Indonesian independent *gay* print media (italicized by Boellstorff to emphasize cultural nuances in meaning when compared to the English word “gay”) as zines because they “challenge definitions of ‘mass’ media,” asserting that they “[demonstrate] the worthiness of *gay* Indonesians for social inclusion.”⁶⁴ Though the Western LGBTQIA+ experience differs from that of the Indonesian one that Boellstorff describes, *GAYa Nusantara* presents an example of the basic ways in which the underground zine network can provide a safe way of validating minority identities.

In an age where internet doxing can be done by nearly anyone with a computer and result in job loss and threat of physical danger, safety in print is invaluable. For zines that are shipped between individuals, return addresses on packages are typically that of P.O. boxes rather than actual residences. Some makers go as far as to never use their real name or remain completely anonymous – a possibility on the internet as well, but it's hard to feel secure in on forums and social media given the complicated language in privacy policies and terms of service. In a time when political views feel more divided than ever before, the zine's role in participatory media is preserved in the inherent safety of the

63. Tom Boellstorff, "Zines and Zones of Desire: Mass Mediated Love, National Romance, and Sexual Citizenship in Gay Indonesia," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63. no. 2 (2004): 367 - 402, doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4133390>.

64. Tom Boellstorff, "Zines and Zones of Desire: Mass Mediated Love, National Romance, and Sexual Citizenship in Gay Indonesia," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63. no. 2 (2004): 367 - 402, doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4133390>.

zine: when makers don't have to fear retaliation, they do not need to compromise the radical nature of their media.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

So many of the reasons why the contemporary zine matters are dependent on each other: there is no singular reason why the contemporary zine matters or continues to exist despite its anachronistic qualities. The space that the zine holds in participatory media influence so many of the factors as to why the zine is still relevant today: it's why the zine is able to bypass the commercial production apparatus, it's why the zine can be as authentic as possible, and it's why the zine is one of the safest and richest spaces for radical thought and theory production.

Purposes for zines have changed since their inception as science fiction fanzines. Sure, fanzines are still made, but zines have evolved to meet different needs over the course of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. In the face of a dominator culture that pushes against concerns regarding late-stage capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and climate change, the zine is uniquely positioned to create embodied communities out of decentralized movements that are not dependent on third parties like commercial publishing houses or website/blog hosts.

The zine's progressive or even revolutionary potential may be disregarded as it has not been directly linked to tangible revolutionary action. To those who argue this, I say they aren't looking hard enough. There is a reason that the advent of the printing press is considered one of the most important events in human history. The independent

press, long before the word “zine” became part of our vocabulary, has long been a tool for radical thought –Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* is a leading example of the influence that the independent press can have over a society. Zines remind us that the thoughts of the ordinary person are valid and worthy of being heard despite a dominator culture that tells us worthiness comes from wealth, social capital, or education level. They offer what bell hooks calls a “pedagogy of hope,” an alternate to the “dominator-controlled mass media, which its constant manipulation of representations in the service of the status quo” where “despair is the greatest threat. When despair prevails we cannot create life-sustaining communities of resistance.”⁶⁵

65. bell hooks, *Teaching Community: Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 12.

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PUBLICATIONS

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Show Review: A Little Bit of Nothing Much	November 2019
In Conversation: Four Artists' Reflections on the Venice Biennale	September 2019

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Tim Faulkner Gallery, Louisville, KY

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2019-2020

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